

Preaching in a Lamenting Mode

Easter Lockdown Sermons in the Netherlands

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Abstract ——— *As the COVID-19 pandemic brought fear and anxiety to people around the world, the Christian community is called to give witness to her hope in the risen Lord. Preaching is a major channel of this witness. The analysis of five Easter sermons, preached in April 2020 by pastors of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, brings to the fore how an alarming contextual situation weighs in on the tone and content of Easter preaching in local churches. A lamenting mode of preaching was found, that voices local communities' distress and strengthens hope, repeating the salvific message of Easter in the face of bewilderment and suffering. The analysis underscores and adds to homiletical theory on lament in preaching.*

1. Introduction

Preaching on Easter Sunday is a grand but difficult task. The resurrection of Jesus as a source of hope and inspiration belongs to the very core of Christian faith. At the same time the Easter message is a mystery, and brings about confusion, raises questions in the life-worlds of Jesus' followers.¹ According to *André Resner*, "Jesus' resurrection, when sprinkled like a magic potion on any and all instances of suffering and loss, ends up more often than not increasing the weight of grief rather than being a source of comfort".²

Easter is celebrated in churches around the world. There is festive music and the singing of Easter hymns. The Easter story from the Gospels is read, and there is a sermon preached by the local pastor. On Easter Sunday, April 12th 2020, however, in churches in the Netherlands, festivity was far away. The COVID-19 crisis overshadowed any celebrative mood. Since Sunday, March 22nd 2020, all services were held on-line due to a nation-wide lockdown. Churches remained empty. Sermons were preached in front of a camera. Church-goers stayed at home and participated in a live-stream. There was anxiety in people's minds and hearts. In the week before Easter approximately 1300 critically ill corona-patients were being treated in Dutch ICU wards. Around 150–200 daily deaths were announced. Many families around the country were dealing with loss and grief.

This setting of crisis, on Easter Sunday 2020, raises homiletical questions: What Easter message do local preachers put forward, given the context of the COVID-19 pandemic? How do they preach new life and hope, standing in an empty church, reaching out to their listeners at home?

¹ *Gerrit Immink*, *Over God gesproken. Preken in theorie en praktijk*, Utrecht 2018, 255.

² *André Resner*, *Living In-Between. Lament, Justice, and the Persistence of the Gospel*, Eugene (OR) 2015, 110.

I collected five Easter sermons that were preached on April 12th 2020 by local pastors of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, in the rural area between Rotterdam and The Hague. The (fictitious) names of the pastors are: Edward, Mat, Tatjana, Betsy, and James. After transcribing the sermons, I proceeded to segmentize, code, and analyse the sermon text, following Grounded Theory research methodology.³

In the Easter period of 2021, the Netherlands was again confronted by a nation-wide lockdown due to COVID-19. For the second year running Easter services were held on-line only or with very small numbers of church-goers present. My future research focuses on comparing the 2020 Easter sermons and sermons preached in the Easter period of 2021, by the same pastors, in their local churches.

2. Sensitizing concept and research question

In his homiletical study “Timing Grace”, *Johan Cilliers* coins situational preaching as preaching that takes place within a certain space and a distinct time, focusing on the appearance and quality of the “here and now” in sermons.⁴ Cilliers refers to the writings of the German theologian *Ernst Lange* (1927–1974), who defines the homiletical act as the effort to understand the hearers in their specific space and time.⁵ Every situation calls for an act of preaching that corresponds to that situation. This implies that preaching is more than the repetition of the ancient Biblical text, such as the Gospel story of the resurrection. In the light of the Christ-promise, as witnessed to in Holy Scripture, a “new word” is spoken by the preacher that is necessary to be heard in this specific time and space.⁶ The sermon is filled with the witness of the Gospel and anchored in the everyday reality of the listener. Situational preaching entails entering the homiletical tension between (a) talking to the listeners about their hopes and disappointments, the threats and possibilities of life-existence; (b) bringing to the fore the relevance and reality of the promise of Christ, in the presence of the hearing community.⁷

Cilliers’ remarks on situational preaching, together with his references to the homiletical thinking of Ernst Lange, form the sensitizing concept with which I entered the research area of five Easter sermons preached by local pastors in the Netherlands.⁸ The open research question was formulated as follows: Given the COVID-19 situation in the Netherlands, how do local pastors address this moment of crisis and speak a “new word”, in the light of the Christ-promise on Easter Sunday?

The research resulted in the discovery of six related homiletical categories: (a) voicing communal distress; (b) identifying with the locked down disciples; (c) revisiting Good Friday; (d) repeating phrases of hope; (e) the two Mary’s as exemplars; (f) listening to

³ *Judith Holton*, The Coding Process and Its Challenges, in: Kathy Charmaz/Antony Bryant (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory*, Los Angeles (CA) 2007, 265–289; *André Verweij*, *Positioning Jesus’ Suffering. A Grounded Theory of Lenten Preaching in Local Parishes*, Delft 2014, 59–83.

⁴ *Johan Cilliers*, *Timing Grace. Reflections on the Temporality of Preaching*, Stellenbosch 2019, 50.

⁵ *Ernst Lange*, *Predigen als Beruf. Aufsätze zu Homiletik, Liturgie und Pfarramt*, München 1982, 50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁷ *Cilliers* (note 4), 51; *Wilfried Engemann*, *Homiletics. Principles and Patterns of Reasoning*, Berlin/Boston 2019, 294.

⁸ Sensitizing concepts are concepts that suggest to the researcher directions for examining and discerning a general sense of what is relevant. Cf. *Uwe Flick*, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research. Fourth Edition*, London 2009, 473.

courageous voices. Together the categories clarify how in the sermons a lamenting mode of preaching relates the urgency of the COVID-19 crisis to the Easter-hope of the local church community.

2.1 Voicing communal distress

Three of the five Easter sermons open in a parallel kind of way. Betsy, James, and Edward start off by giving voice to the situation of distress experienced by the church-community. On Easter Sunday the congregation cannot come together, the church is empty, there is no singing, there are no festivities. This communal distress includes lockdown life: loved ones cannot be visited, homes for the elderly are closed, people are afraid of the virus, and they fear becoming sick and dying. All five pastors give voice to this situation of crisis that has become part of daily life.⁹

Betsy begins her sermon as follows:

Easter does not fit this year. An Easter like this I have never experienced before. Easter feelings are far away [...] – Isn't Easter the moment we sing beautiful songs and listen to a great story? We turn out in new clothes, looking good. Easter is a day we prepare well. Everything has to turn out right. Now it's different. This day of celebration is different. The church is empty, we cannot see each other. That's not what we want.

Pastor James begins his sermon on a festive note, but after two sentences he also gives voice to the pain and fear of the community, including himself. He contrasts the joyfulness of Easter with the bitterness of the current situation:

Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son. Endless is the victory Thou o'er death hast won [...]. We like to sing this song in a full church, with heart and soul, as one celebrative choir [...]. Now it's all different. There is nothing, nothing at all. The church is nearly empty [...]. We are stricken by this. We share the fear that is around us. There isn't much happiness in our hearts today, the words of the Easter hymn appear meaningless. Is this hymn what we feel today?

At the beginning of his Easter sermon, Edward too shares the disappointment and frustration felt by all:

On this important day of the church we want to come together in a festive service. We want to sing about faith and trust, against the darkness of the night [...]. Easter 2020 is so different to what we hoped for. No festivities. It's quiet in the streets. There is fear in the air. A spooky virus is moving around, a virus that makes you sick, and can be the cause of death [...]. How can we sing Hallelujah today?

Pastors Betsy, James, and Edward open their sermons with the painful chasm between lockdown life and the high note of faith and joy Easter calls for. They put forward heart-felt questions: "How can we sing Hallelujah today?" (Edward); "Is this hymn what we feel today?" (James); "Isn't Easter the moment we sing beautiful songs?" (Betsy). In this way,

⁹ Pastors Mat and Tatjana also give voice to communal distress, although less explicitly in the opening part of their sermons.

the pastors give voice to a communal experience of distress and fear. The anxiety of the hearers is given speech. Their pain is named and identified as a shared pain.¹⁰

2.2 Identifying with the locked down disciples

Pastors Mat, Edward, James, and Betsy point to the parallel experience between the present Easter lockdown and the situation of the disciples in Jerusalem, according to St. John's Gospel. They dwell on the fears and questions of the disciples as a "mirror" of the experiences of the hearers. Putting forward this "mirror-experience" brings about: (a) points of recognition for hearers today; (b) moments of consolation, as it becomes clear how "they are where we are" and "we are where they are".

After his sermon opening, Edward points to the parallel situation of the disciples:

I was thinking about this misery we are going through. Then I realized: this must have been the situation of the disciples too, that first Easter Sunday. No Hallelujahs. Silent streets. Living in quarantine, behind locked doors. With a shock their lives came to a standstill. There is fear in the air. Danger is everywhere. What's next? This isn't a happy Easter. They too are confounded by what's happened.

Betsy explains how on this Easter Sunday it is easier for hearers to understand the situation of the disciples in Jerusalem, whose discouragement and fear are felt today as well:

We now understand what the disciples went through, that first Easter Sunday. We experience what they experienced, because this is our situation too. On the day of the resurrection of Jesus, there was no festive service, no large celebration. Our hearts and minds are not in the mood for a celebration, not today. Nor were the hearts of the disciples. They're scared, confused, discouraged.

After pastor James points to the situation of the disciples, he starts imagining the questions that arose in their minds, questions that remain without answers:

Today we look the disciples in the eye and we see fear and despair. On that first day of the week they came together behind locked doors. What's going on in their minds? What questions are they asking? Why did everything work out this way? Why did Jesus go to Jerusalem in the first place? Why did God let this all happen? We recognize these thoughts, there is fear in our hearts too.

James' identifying with the locked down disciples creates room for asking questions that also surge in the hearts of the hearers: Where is God? Why does God let this happen?

¹⁰ In his "Sermon Preached in an Empty Church", *Richard Lischer* voices the distress of standing alone in an empty church. His focus is less communal and more personal: "This morning when I came into this church to preach, my heart sank. The place was as empty as a tomb. Just me and the video recorder. Over the years I have dreamed up many a sermon, almost always alone [...]. I have never delivered one in an empty church. It is strange." *Lischer* preached this sermon (on the Emmaus story) on April 26th 2020, in St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Durham, NC. *Richard Lischer*, *Just Tell the Truth. A Call to Faith, Hope, and Courage*, Grand Rapids (MI) 2021, 78.

Relating the COVID-19 crisis to the challenge of Easter-faith ultimately leads to a cry to God, for insight, deliverance, or just the question: Why?¹¹

2.3 Revisiting Good Friday

In the days preceding Easter Sunday, the five congregations passed through Holy Week. On Good Friday they solemnly stood near the cross. There is a sharp contrast between the darkness of Good Friday and the festive mood of Easter, as the pain of the dereliction makes way for the light of a new beginning. However, in all five sermons a “revisiting” of Good Friday takes place. The solidary suffering of Jesus, his standing next to those who suffer, is brought to the fore as a salvific force that hearers need today.¹²

In pastor Mat’s Easter sermon, he takes his hearers back to the cross, in order to discover who is standing next to them today:

On Friday we sung about a lamb that took our sins upon himself. He hung there, abandoned by God and man [...]. That is a consolation for everyone who feels abandoned today. Jesus knows what this is about, he knows what the patients on the ICU’s are going through, in the centers for the elderly where nobody is allowed in [...]. Jesus knows what this feels like [...]. Good Friday is the moment we are connected to God. Without social distancing he reaches out his hand and stands near us.

Revisiting Good Friday at Easter enables Mat to revitalize the salvific themes of that liturgical day and bring to the fore how the cross of Jesus brings about consolation in the loneliness and despair many hearers are encountering.

In her Easter sermon, Tatjana also dwells by the cross. She tells the hearers about an artist and an actor, who work together, “staging” both the crucifixion and the resurrection:¹³

Recently I saw a presentation: behind a large cloth there was an actor, moving slowly. There was also an artist. The artist was painting the cloth, following the exact movements of the actor. In her movements the actor enacted the crucifixion. The artist painted her cross-like movements on the cloth. Then suddenly the movement stopped, in death. This is the end, I thought. Then the actor picked up a knife, made a tear in the cloth, stepped through it and disappeared. Everyone was shocked. What remained was a cloth with the crucifixion painted on it, and a tear in the middle.

Together with her hearers, Tatjana focuses on the cross, telling about the movements of the actor, ending in death, and the “tear in the cloth” that represents the resurrection.

¹¹ Questions like these can be compared to biblical Psalms of “disorientation”, with their rhetorical questions, such as Why? and How long? According to *Mary Catherine Hilker*, “Lament reflects the psalmist’s experience of profound disorientation or dislocation in terms of both external enemies and ills [...] and internal loss and confusion.” *Mary Catherine Hilker*, *Naming Grace. Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination*, New York 1997, 117. See also *Walter Brueggemann*, *The Costly Loss of Lament*, in: *The Psalms: The Life of Faith*, edited by Patrick Miller, Minneapolis (MN) 1995, 98–111.

¹² In my research of Lenten (and Good Friday) sermons, the proximity of Jesus (his standing close to the hearers) emerged as a redemptive arrangement of the positioning of Jesus’ suffering by preachers. Hearers encounter Jesus as partaking in their suffering lives, struggling together towards redemption. *Verweij* (note 3), 89–98.

¹³ Tatjana refers to a creative performance named “Ostern” by the German artist *Barbara Heinisch* (born 1944).

Here too, it is apparent that Good Friday cannot be passed over. The cross-like painting on the cloth remains for all to see, forming the prelude to the mystery of a new beginning.

2.4 Repeating phrases of hope

The five Easter sermons not only voice distress and fear. There is also a “yet” that connects anxiety to hope. From the Easter story the pastors repeat phrases of hope, such as: “Do not be afraid” or “I wish you peace”. The words of the angel and of Jesus aim to console the hearers, calling for their faith-endurance. Likewise, little words such as “until”, “however”, and “but” are repeated in the sermons as a counterpoint to the dismay the pastors have already put forward. The repetition of phrases and little words undergird the faith-call the pastors are making.

In his sermon, pastor Mat addresses the anxiety of his hearers:

Do not be afraid. These words may sound superficial and cheap. Do not be afraid. This is not someone trying to make you feel good [...]. This is Easter’s refrain, it’s what the Bible is all about, do not be afraid, I am with you, do not be afraid, I know the longing of your hearts...do not be afraid, he is with you, he is in the lead, on the road to Galilee. The Lord meets us today: do not be afraid, give me your restlessness, your insecurities.

In this fragment, Mat repeats the phrase “do not be afraid” six times. The repetition of the phrase is meant to touch the hearers who may appropriate these words in their insecure and vulnerable lives.

Pastor Edward also repeats the phrase “do not be afraid”, and tells the hearers how these words encouraged him personally:

When I was preparing the sermon, I underlined these words three times over, big and thick, with my pen. Do not be afraid, you are looking for a dead Jesus, he is not here, he is risen [...]. The risen Lord tells the women: do not be afraid, I underlined these words again, for myself, do not be afraid, but go and tell my brothers they must go to Galilee.

Near the end of his sermon, by repeating the word “until”, pastor James calls the fear of his hearers to a halt:

Fear reigns [...] until Jesus himself appears in the room and wishes them peace. Fear reigns today [...] until Jesus appears in our homes and wishes us peace. Those four words, just four: I wish you peace [...]. Jesus says to us: I wish you peace. What kind of peace is this? A peace that surpasses all understanding, that overcomes fear and panic. Where Jesus comes, there is peace and all is well.

Pastor James combines a repetition of the word “until” with the repetition of Jesus’ consoling words to his disciples: “I wish you peace”. Given the experience of how difficult

it is to attain Easter-peace at present, repeating words and phrases may well help uplift the hearers' life of faith.¹⁴

2.5 The two Mary's as exemplars

The Easter sermons not only identify with the locked down disciples, they also put forward the two Mary's (from St. Matthew's Gospel) as exemplars. Their faith and obedience guide the hearers towards a similar stand for themselves. Unlike the disciples, the two Mary's do not remain in their homes, they get moving towards the grave where they encounter the angel. Then they start moving again, obeying the angel's words and meet the risen Lord. This faith-activity typifies the women. The pastors encourage the hearers to become look-a-likes of the two Mary's, moving through the COVID-crisis with bravery and strength.

While contrasting the disciples and the two Mary's, pastor Betsy stresses the women's faith-obedience:

We don't see the disciples anywhere. They all fled. We do see the women. They come out of their homes, they leave their homes: Mary of Magdalene and the other Mary [...] they follow Jesus all the way, they remain with him. They stand near the cross, they're nearby at the funeral. And now they make their way to the grave [...], they obey the angel, do what he asks them to do, without any questions, they're underway already.

Pastor Edward puts forward the two Mary's as both example and personal inspiration:

The two Mary's go. That's important, they go to the grave [...] and then they go again, away from the grave. That's what really touched me in the Easter story: don't remain where you are, with all these horrible things pushing you down. Dare to leave your grave of distress and fear. Only then, only when you start moving will you meet the risen Lord.

Moving away from COVID-distress and fear in order to experience Easter joy is not easy. Pastor Tatjana says we cannot bypass distress; it is here anyhow. We can, however, move through the pain towards a newness of life as is shown by the women:

We aren't lifted away from our problems. We can't bypass them either. But there is a route right through them, a route to the other side, where everything is safe. The women near the grave leave that place. Go and tell. That's what they do. That's the message of Easter. We cannot escape our difficulties, we must accept these hard times and then move forward, with the light of God shining upon us and going with us.

2.6 Listening to courageous voices

In addition to the positioning of the two Mary's as faith-examples for the hearers, the pastors also point out courageous and inspiring figures from recent history. For example, martyrs from the Second World War, such as *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* and *Etty Hillesum*, singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen, and the "heroes" of the present COVID-crisis who work

¹⁴ According to *Luke Powery*, the use of repetition is one of the visible traits of a heightened, passionate rhetoric that is present in both sermonic lament and celebration. Repetition contributes to the "homiletical rhythm of lament". *Luke Powery*, *Spirit Speech. Lament and Celebration in Preaching*, Nashville (TN) 2009, 122.

in the hospitals and ICU wards. Listening to these voices strengthens the “yet” of the Easter sermons and encourages the hearers in their situation.

Pastor Mat begins his sermon with a reference to Etty Hillesum. He ends his sermon speaking about the witness of ICU nurse Arjan and an Armenian doctor called Gor:

In 1942, somewhere in Amsterdam where she was hiding, just before she was deported, Etty Hillesum wrote: ‘We should not hide our fears, we must face them and carry them. Yet we must not let fear take over our lives, as if fear is the only thing in the world.’ That’s something for us to consider today, in times of corona. We must face our fears, but must also beware of letting fear rule our lives. [beginning of the sermon]

I read about an ICU nurse called Arjan. ‘I’m not afraid,’ he says. ‘I know the risks, I’m in danger too, but I experience peace and blessing in the work I do.’ I also saw a doctor from Armenia on television. His name is Gor. He’s been on talk shows, telling what it’s like to work with corona patients, to accompany them back to life or towards death. He says he meets his patients without fear. He is strengthened by Isaiah 43: Do not be afraid; I am with you; I encourage you.” [End of the sermon.]

Near the end of his sermon, pastor Edward refers to the courage of Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

This past week it was exactly seventy-five years ago that Bonhoeffer was executed, only in his thirties, like Jesus, because of his resistance and resilience. Bonhoeffer’s last words were, ‘This is the end, but for me it is the beginning of new life. God is with us, night and day,’ he says. So we too may stand up today, stand up to whatever comes our way, with consolation and hope.

Tatjana cites the song “Anthem” by singer-songwriter *Leonard Cohen* as a consolation for hearers today:

Just this past week someone sent me a text-message. It contained those famous words by Leonard Cohen: ‘There is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.’ We recognize this. This is about our lives too. We are wounded people. We need help; we live in brokenness. There are many cracks. But that’s how the light gets into our lives. I saw some of this light. I saw people helping other people; I see hope entering our community; I see helping hands. It’s all coming through the cracks.

Looking around in the community, Tatjana sees vulnerable people, including herself, with “cracks” of brokenness. What encourages her is how people are helping others. Their light is shining through the cracks, turning vulnerability into an occasion to bring light into other people’s lives.¹⁵

3. Reflection and conclusion

The five Easter sermons are marked by a sense of urgency and authenticity. Standing in an empty church, using the livestream, the pastors speak from their hearts to the hearts of their hearers. The sermons are not so much “about” the tension between situational distress and Easter hope; rather, they “voice” this tension in a variety of ways. Often the

¹⁵ *Richard Lischer* ends his “Sermon Preached in an Empty Church” (April 26th 2020) on a similar note. He refers to the courageous voices and works of luminaries, through which Christ appears in other guises: “roaming the corridors of nursing homes [...] pausing to bless those who are alone and in distress [...] the young man who pushes the gurney, every day exposing himself to death in order to help others [...]. Is there any amazement left in us when we recognize such courage?” *Lischer* (note 10), 78f.

“I” (or “we”) of the sermon is used: the person of the preacher takes part in what is at stake. Although the COVID-19 situation is omni-present in the sermons, in due course a “yet” arises from the Easter story and other stories of hope.

The first three categories: “voicing communal distress”, “identifying with the locked down disciples”, and “revisiting Good Friday” relate foremost to the darkness of the crisis, providing an avenue for the hearers’ feelings of anxiety. However, when the pastor brings to the fore the salvific proximity of the crucified Jesus, a “new word” is spoken. Such new words appear prominently in the second three categories: “repeating phrases of hope”, “the two Mary’s as exemplars”, and “listening to courageous voices”. This “new word” is not new in the sense that it has not been heard before. It is the personal and earnest speaking of a “known word” that communicates hope in the face of a crisis situation. For example pastor Mat telling about how the Armenian doctor Gor found Isaiah’s words, “Do not be afraid,” to be his guide while treating COVID patients. “Do not be afraid” lightens up as a timely word that strengthens the hearers in their life-worlds.

Together the six categories clarify the practice of a lamenting mode of preaching. In homiletical theory, preaching as lament has been put forward by *Mary Catherine Hilkert*, who stresses the importance of naming pain and memories of suffering in sermons as part of a larger journey towards healing, wholeness, and joy.¹⁶

Sally Brown, writing in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks in the United States of America, embraces lament as a paradigm not only for practices such as prayer and pastoral caregiving, but also for preaching.¹⁷ Brown distinguishes three types of lament sermons: (a) a pastoral lament sermon names and embraces the present experience of loss and disorientation; (b) a critical-prophetic lament sermon accents tropes of protest, imprecation, and self-examination; (c) a theological-interrogatory sermon focuses on the interrogation of the divine nature and purpose.¹⁸ The five sermons I analyzed relate foremostly to the pastoral lament sermon, as typified by Brown, especially in the voicing of communal distress. While the sermons hardly reveal any critical-prophetic lament, interrogation of the divine nature and purpose is slightly present, for example in the questions posed by the locked down disciples in pastor James’ sermon. Most questions in the sermons, however, relate to a communal sharing of distress and uncertainty.

In his study of lament and celebration in preaching, *Luke Powery* defines “sermonic lament” as preaching that is marked by six characteristics: (a) the concrete naming of the human reality of pain, whether it be individual, communal, or social; (b) a direct mode of speech that reveals an honest approach to the nature of human life; (c) self-inclusion; the one who preaches does not distance herself from the situation; (d) explicit references to faith in God and Christ, in the midst of naming the pain; (e) moving towards celebration and praise of God; (f) a heightened, passionate rhetoric that contributes to the homiletical rhythm of lament.¹⁹

The five sermons I analyzed follow Powery’s first four characteristics quite closely: naming human reality and pain; using a direct mode of speech; self-inclusion; and

¹⁶ *Hilkert* (note 11), 119.

¹⁷ *Sally Brown*, *When Lament Shapes the Sermon*, in: *Lament. Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, edited by Sally Brown, Patrick Miller, Louisville (KY) 2005, 28.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁹ *Powery* (note 14), 119–127.

referring to faith in God and Christ. A movement towards celebration and praise, however, is not clearly present in the sermons. Although pastor James closes his Easter sermon on a festive note, citing the verses of an Easter hymn, the other four sermons close more humbly with words of hope and consolation. Powery's sixth characteristic (of a heightened rhetoric) connects to my research category "repeating phrases of hope", in the repetitive use of Gospel phrases such as "Do not be afraid" and "I wish you peace".

Based on my research, I suggest adding to Powery's theory of sermonic lament the characteristic of "Gospel-related storytelling". In five of the six research categories, aspects of storytelling, such as portraying Biblical and historical figures as exemplars and highlighting present-day heroes, emerge as a key element of recharging faith and courage in times of trouble.²⁰

In conclusion, it is clear that the five pastors, Mat, Tatjana, Betsy, Edward, and James, remain close to their local church communities even as they preach during the lockdown on Easter Sunday April 12th 2020, with the world-wide dimensions and implications of the COVID-19 crisis. The pastors preach not only to their communities, but also on behalf of and as part of the community. Steering away from interpreting the pandemic's possible meaning and message in this critical moment in history, the pastors hold on to their first and foremost calling: attending to the spiritual needs of the flock.

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²⁰ "Gospel-related storytelling" extends Powery's fourth characteristic of referring to faith in God and Christ, in the midst of naming the pain, with a Scripture-connected focus and concreteness.